

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
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June 6, 2008

EMS TRANSMISSION 6/6/08
Instruction Memorandum No. ID-2008-051
Expires: 09/30/2009

To: District Managers

From: State Director

Subject: 2008 Wildfire Season and Sage-grouse Conservation

Program Area: Wildlife, Special Status Species, Fire

Purpose: The purpose of this Instruction Memorandum (IM) is to provide guidance intended to help facilitate fire planning and fire suppression actions to foster the protection of key sage-grouse habitat and sagebrush steppe in Idaho.

Policy/Action: This IM provides clarification of conservation measures for fire planning and wildland fire management, as related to key sage-grouse habitat and restoration areas, as identified locally. How Idaho Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will protect sage-grouse habitat as a priority should be addressed in Fire Management Plans (FMPs), Fire Planning Analysis (FPA), initial attack and suppression resource allocation, and Wildland Fire Situation Analyses. Though the BLM recognizes the importance of protecting sage-grouse habitat and sagebrush steppe, it is recognized that managers and fire personnel need flexibility when making operational decisions to ensure firefighter and public safety and other critical resources are protected.

1. General priorities. In all fire suppression and fire planning efforts, the following general recommendation modified from the *Conservation Plan for the Greater Sage-grouse in Idaho* (State Plan, page 4.16), should be incorporated: *"In the event that multiple ignitions occur in a local suppression area, suppression priorities are to protect human life and property. In situations where human safety or property will not be compromised or threatened, employ fire suppression tactics that protect sagebrush ecosystems by minimizing the average size of unplanned fires, maintaining productive sage-grouse habitat, and maintaining sagebrush cover. In the event of multiple fire starts in sagebrush ecosystems, suppression priority will be as outlined by specific Fire Management Unit (FMU) based on the following general guidelines:*

Priority 1 - Key Habitat

- a. Wyoming big sagebrush sites*
- b. Mountain big sagebrush sites*
- c. Other habitats (e.g. early sagebrush, low sagebrush)*

Priority 2 - Restoration habitat

- a. Areas with established or recovering sagebrush*
- b. Areas with minimal or no sagebrush cover*

Priority 3 - Juniper or annual grasslands where delaying initial attack does not threaten priorities 1-2 above.

2. Fire Suppression and Wildland Fire Management. Given the broad vegetative considerations in item 1, above, the general priority is to protect key habitat to the extent possible. While all remaining key habitat is important due to recent and historical habitat losses, it must be recognized that certain areas may be of greater local priority for initial attack than others during multiple ignitions or simultaneous large wildfire events. Also, certain restoration/burned area rehabilitation areas may also be a high priority to protect locally, due to substantial effort and expenditures in project implementation and/or progress toward recovery.

In order to ensure the highest priority areas are spatially available to Dispatch, Incident Management Teams and fire crews across southern Idaho, Districts are asked to review the 2007 Sage-grouse Habitat Planning Map and other appropriate local information and delineate in GIS, the highest priority areas for wildfire suppression for sage-grouse, within each dispatch/Fire Management Plan area (e.g. Southwest Idaho, Southcentral, Central Idaho, Eastern Idaho).

The spatial data for the 2007 sage-grouse habitat planning map are located at:

Q:\loc\gis\final_data\wildlife\Sage_grouse\sg_2007

A PDF of the 2007 sage-grouse habitat planning map, ready for plotting, is located at:

Q:\loc\gis\map_products\wildlife\sagegrouse\Statewide_Habitat\2007

In addition, wildlife biologists were recently provided a pdf copy of the 2007 sage-grouse habitat, overlain with active leks and lek buffers, that should encompass most of the associated breeding habitat. This map may also be useful in identifying the priority areas.

In delineating the priority initial attack areas, it is crucial that fire managers and wildlife biologists coordinate closely. Field Office Managers and Resource Advisors should engage Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) regional wildlife biologists if available. Polygons can encompass/overlap key habitat and important restoration or burned area rehabilitation areas, and may vary in size depending on local priorities.

Paths to the shapefiles of the priority suppression areas are to be provided to Christa Braun and Cindy Lou McDonald at ID-956 by COB June 13, 2008, for Idaho State Office (ISO) review. Data will be aggregated into a statewide coverage by approximately June 27, 2008. Fire Management Officers (FMOs) will ensure that the 2007 sage-grouse habitat map and priority

areas are utilized for priority dispatching of firefighting resources. The FMOs will also input this data into WILDCAD, ArcGIS, and laptops/computers/GPS units so sage-grouse habitat data can be spatially displayed for use by fire crews no later than July 1, 2008.

Following are a number of additional considerations to emphasize when conducting fire suppression actions on fires occurring within or threatening sage-grouse key habitat:

- District managers/fire personnel will ensure that adequate briefings are provided to Incident Commanders, Dispatch, and Engine Bosses early in the fire season regarding the importance of protecting sage-grouse habitat and sagebrush steppe.
- Avoid burning-out of islands of unburned sagebrush. Mop-up in these areas where it is safe to do so.
- Utilize Resource Advisors knowledgeable about local wildlife habitat concerns/priorities.
- Use the appropriate management response that will give the highest probability of success and minimize acres burned given resources available.
- When appropriate, utilize retardant and heavy equipment (dozers) to minimize/reduce fire size.
- When multiple fires occur, ensure Field Managers, District Managers, and Resource Advisors are involved in setting priorities for management actions.
- Consider purchasing additional water delivery apparatus to provide more water on-site (e.g. heliwell, Tatra engine).
- On critical fire weather days (i.e red flag warnings), preposition suppression equipment and increase patrols as appropriate.

3. Fire Management Plan updates: The State Plan on page 4.17, Conservation Measure 1 recommends: *“Ensure Fire Management Plans are updated annually, reassess priorities and incorporate the conservation measures outlined in this plan, particularly identifying the appropriate management response in FMUs where stronghold and key habitat exist.”*

To facilitate implementation of Conservation Measure 1, Districts will be expected to update FMPs with the 2007 Sage-grouse Habitat Planning Map (Map 5 via addendum) and utilize it in dispatch prior to the start of the 2008 fire season. Offices should send their FMP updates to the ISO for posting on the internet prior to June 30, 2008. For 2008, it is expected that only Map 5 (Sage-grouse Habitat to be protected) is updated. After fire season, more extensive FMP updates will likely occur after After Action Reviews are conducted in preparation for the 2009 fire season.

4. Fire Planning Analysis: With regard to the 2008 FPA workload, Districts will ensure Fire Workload Areas (FWAs), developed as a part of the 2008 FPA effort and required for the FPA process by June 1, 2008, use the updated 2007 Sage-grouse Habitat Map and reflect the importance of protecting key sage-grouse habitat, on BLM lands in particular, from loss due to wildland fire.

Timeframe: This IM is effective immediately.

Background: Implementation of additional measures to conserve sage-grouse and sage-grouse habitat is appropriate based on wildfire trends over the last several years.

It is important to understand that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is reviewing the status of the greater sage-grouse for possible listing as threatened or endangered. Regardless of the outcome, sage-grouse will remain vulnerable due to on-going effects associated with wildfire and other factors. It is therefore prudent that Idaho BLM undertake efforts in both the immediate and long term to ensure that wildfire suppression activities conserve sage-grouse habitats to the greatest extent possible.

In July 2006, Idaho BLM, in cooperation with the IDFG and other Federal, state, and non-government partners completed the *Conservation Plan for the Greater Sage-grouse in Idaho* (State Plan). A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) implementing the State Plan was signed by state-level directors. The MOU was endorsed by then Governor James Risch, on July 10, 2006. The MOU states that “*Federal Government Agencies shall... Implement, to the extent possible, the actions identified in the 2006 Conservation Plan for the Greater Sage-grouse in Idaho; work collaboratively with the aforementioned state government agencies, to the extent possible, in supporting the intent and actions identified in said Plan; work collaboratively through the Idaho Local Working Groups, and other appropriate mechanisms, to support the intent and actions contained in said Plan* (State Plan Page xix and xxx.).

This IM is intended to reinforce the intent of the MOU, and to ensure that conservation actions are implemented to the furtherance of sage-grouse conservation in Idaho.

Manual/Handbook Sections Affected: This IM serves as interim guidance to Idaho BLM Manual Supplement 6840 - Special Status Species Management until it is updated.

Coordination: This IM was coordinated within the Division of Resource Services and specifically between programs in the Branch of Resources and Science (ID-931).

Contact: If you have questions on this IM contact Paul Makela, Wildlife Biologist, at (208) 373-3809 or via email (Paul_Makela@blm.gov) or Krista Gollnick-Waid, Fire Use Specialist, at (208) 373-3856 (Krista_Gollnick@blm.gov).

Boise District with Union: Management is reminded to notify and satisfy any bargaining requirements prior to implementation.

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